



CRAIG HICKMAN 2022-07-26

THE ABJECT WORLD

PHILOFICTION ABJECT, DELEUZE, HORROR, KRISTEVA, UNKNOWN, VIRTUAL

The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered.

—Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

The only certain thing we know about this planet is that it is a theater of pain, suffering, and horror: crawling life, organismic life, the predation of life, the cannibalistic vat of a sun-borne festival of continuous survival, eating, sex, and death. Humanity has sought ways to deny this fact

through religion, art, philosophy and every form of Transcendence. We seek to overcome the end game of mortality in dreams of immortality. In that sense my whole philosophy of existence remains with the actual and the immanence of a this-worldly thought that seeks to understand why we deny reality and the Real? I could care less about what happens before or after our existence. I only care about what happens here, now. As Earnest Becker in his last work, *Escape from Evil* made clear:

Existence, for all organismic life, is a constant struggle to feed—a struggle to incorporate whatever other organisms they can fit into their mouths and press down their gullets without choking. Seen in these stark terms, life on this planet is a gory spectacle, a science-fiction nightmare in which digestive tracts fitted with teeth at one end are tearing away at whatever flesh they can reach, and at the other end are piling up the fuming waste excrement as they move along in search of more flesh. I think this is why the epoch of the dinosaurs exerts such a strange fascination on us: it is an epic food orgy with king-size actors who convey unmistakably what organisms are dedicated to. Sensitive souls have reacted with shock to the elemental drama of life on this planet, and one of the reasons that Darwin so shocked his time—and still bothers ours—is that he showed this bonecrushing, blood-drinking drama in all its elementality and necessity: Life cannot go on without the mutual devouring of organisms. If at the end of each person's life he were to be presented with the living spectacle of all that he had organismically incorporated in order to stay alive, he might well feel horrified by the living energy he had ingested. The horizon of a gourmet, or even the average person, would be taken up with hundreds of chickens, flocks of lambs and sheep, a small herd of steers, sties full of pigs, and rivers of fish. The din alone would be deafening. To paraphrase Elias Canetti, each organism raises its head over a field of corpses, smiles into the sun, and declares life good.¹

“Life cannot go on without the mutual devouring of organisms”. A truism that bears repeating over and over because we as humans hide that fact from ourselves to assuage our sense of guilt and anxiety that we, too, are merely food for the organismic festival of death this planet is. Pick up any horror novel or collection of weird tales with all their varied assortment of vampires, werewolves, ghosts, mummies, demons, or elder gods, most horror relies for much of its effect on the direct collision between the natural and the unknown, between what we believe to be true about the world and what we fear may be the reality just outside our perception of it. As Lovecraft suggested long ago “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown”. As Eugene Thatcher, a young philosopher puts it,

I would propose that horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but that horror be understood as being about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us).²

To think the inhuman and non-human world-without-us, a realm devoid of our anthropomorphic and humanist ideals, culture, and civilization where the stark power of darkness reigns under the full blast furnace of the Sun. As Fernando Pessoa in his *The Book of Disquiet* says,

I write my literature as I write my ledger entries – carefully and indifferently. Next to the vast starry sky and the enigma of so many souls, the night of the unknown abyss and the chaos of nothing making sense – next to all this, what I write in the ledger and what I write on this paper that tells my soul are equally confined to the Rua dos Douradores, woefully little in the face of the universe's millionaire expanses.³

As Blaise Pascal a few centuries ago remarked: “Man is equally incapable of seeing the nothingness from which he emerges and the infinity in which he is engulfed.” We live in a sea of darkness surrounded by the innumerable stars and galaxies we may never know or see other than the distance of their light as it sheds its dead rays on us from some ancient past to which we do not have access. It's as if everything has already happened and we are only living its death even as we live our lives, the ghosts of ancient worlds gone into the abyss haunt our daily lives like memories of forgotten dreams. We are alone in a realm we did not create much less understand or know. We question these fragments of the only reality we know and fill it with our human thoughts not knowing whether these are real or unreal.

Philosophers and scientists alike seek to provide us answers to the ultimate questions about existence to assuage our pain and suffering. Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, Lao tzu, Confucius, Zarathustra, and so many ancient bearers of the ‘truth’ belabored the miracle of life offering in poetry or speech that various parables and ideas that now fill thousands of volumes of commentary on the religious and sacred ways of existence. For a little over two-hundred years we in the West have sought above all to escape this religious world of our ancestors in a secular and atheistic worldview based strictly on the ‘human condition’ of being animals in an organic and anorganic cosmos.

Some thinkers on horror opt for a biological view such as Mathias Clasen in his *Why Horror Seduces* claiming that “horror fiction is crucially dependent on evolved properties of the human central nervous system, and thus that a nuanced and scientifically valid understanding of horror fiction requires that we take human evolutionary history seriously.”⁴ Others like Brad Baumgartner see horror as an apophatic anti-mysticism, one in which unlike “traditional mystics, horror writers do not seek union with the divine.” He goes on to suggest that in horror we find a “logic of negation” which “in relation to the horror of reality” we find a “horror effectuated by our alienation from absolute unreality, horror’s analog to the medieval mystic’s God.” (4) He discovers in certain contemporary weird horror authors like Thomas Ligotti a “dark mysticism”: we find a perverse darkness mysticism: always already living in immanent darkness, a state of, we might call, noct(e)rnity, there is nothing to “wake up” to, and even if there were, it wouldn’t be worth waking up for it.” (4) In this kind of horror as Baumgartner suggests we discover a horror fiction that “deploys apophatic techniques in order to describe negatively the indescribable.” (3)

We all know and see, feel and touch the phenomenal world around us, our sciences can describe the most distant galaxies and peer into the heart of the quantum void and tell us about the quarks and “Higgs Boson” or so-to-speak “God Particle”. But there is something else, something we ‘intuit’ at the edge of this phenomenal world we inhabit, something we know is there but that we cannot apprehend through our sense only through the intuition of our minds.

Kant labeled it the noumenal and just as quickly made it off-limits to science and philosophy. It became a blank placeholder for all that which lies outside reason and our ability to describe in natural language or mathematics. And, yet it persists in the dark hollows of our deepest imaginings, our expressions in art, painting, music, and the various threads of superstition, religious, and sacred realms long abandoned to the mystic fringe.

Another thinker of horror speaking to one of H.P. Lovecraft's many tales states that the main character is caught in a 'liminal state' of ontological paradoxes, one that invites the "reader to question the boundary between life and death, human and non-human, consciousness and world, spirit and matter. What seems to be a story about speculative technology turns out to be a story that is also about speculative metaphysics, about the possibility of some horrific vitalism, life sustained by the power of the will rather than the operation of organs. Such philosophical speculations are not illustrated using the dry, detached tone of the metaphysician, however, but with expostulations of growing repugnance..."⁶ That disgust might be central to horror of the unknown and our fear and dread of both the underlying truth of our organic life and the strange and bewildering powers that seem forever impinging on us from the Outside in is central to a certain mode of being in the world. As Newell states it many of us "dwell with both disgust and fascination upon things beyond the limit of thought: what it is like to be dead, what happens to consciousness after death and the mystery of thinking matter. Such stories are speculative portals, vortices through which realities otherwise unthinkable might be imagined. They seek to propel readers vertiginously into the realm of the unknown." (9-10)

The 'realm of the unknown', the 'noumenal', the void of the immaterial realm that seems to float between the real and unreal, reality and unreality. Philosophers have argued over Kant's notion of the noumenal from the beginning. There isn't any agreement among them as to what he meant by this strange concept. My recent excursion into Deleuze demonstrates this in that for him Kant's noumenon is internal to the phenomenal. For Deleuze, the noumenal is the being of the sensible, and can only be encountered or intuited, not represented. This goes with Deleuze's anti-representational philosophy which harbors an attack on all forms of Transcendence opting instead for an absolute 'univocity' (Spinoza) which relies on a pure 'plane of immanence':

The process of encounter which forces us to think is not a sensible being, but the being of the sensible. It is not what is given, but that by which the given is given. The encounter is forced into the sensible realm by intensity. Intensity is real, but insensible in terms of representation, unthinkable in terms of concepts. The real transcendental condition of the given is the virtual Idea, within which intensities flow and surge. Conceptual thought is not applied to already given objects, but instead, thought is forced on us in the encounter. The virtual Idea refers to the genetic and temporal process of pure difference based in intensity. There is no external conditioning of the object of experience, but only internal generation and determination of the real object. There is no duality between concept and given.⁷

One could almost suggest a parallel between Kant's distinction between phenomenal / noumenal and Deleuze's distinction between actual / virtual. He derived the notion of Virtual from Bergson:

...from Time and Free Will, wherein Bergson distinguishes the subjective and the objective, appears to be all the more important insofar as it is the first to introduce indirectly the notion of the virtual. This notion of the virtual will come to play an increasingly important role in Bergsonian philosophy.¹² For, as we shall see, the same author who rejects the concept of possibility – reserving a use for it only in relation to matter and to closed systems, but always seeing it as the source of all kinds of false problems – is also he who develops the notion of the virtual to its highest degree and bases a whole philosophy of memory and life on it. (43) 8

In another passage Deleuze remarks on Bergson's use of the virtual: "What Bergson calls "pure recollection" has no psychological existence. This is why it is called virtual, inactive, and unconscious." (55) For Deleuze then the virtual is about the pure ontology of time and recollection: "Strictly speaking, the psychological is the present. Only the present is "psychological"; but the past is pure ontology; pure recollection has only ontological significance." (56) This notion of time, ontology, and recollection all develop in Deleuze metaphysical system of difference and repetition: "It is a case of there being distinct levels, each one of which contains the whole of our past, but in a more or less contracted state. It is in this sense that one can speak of the regions of Being itself, the ontological regions of the past "in general," all coexisting, all "repeating" one another." (61). Deleuze will speak of the 'virtual coexistence' of all the levels of the past, of all the levels of tension, extended to the whole of the universe: "This idea no longer simply signifies my relationship with being, but the relationship of all things with being. Everything happens as if the universe were a tremendous Memory." (77)

It's as if each of us harbors within ourselves the memory of the universe because the whole of this virtual past, the ontological vectors of everything that has ever happened, exists in a virtual state of coexistence in a virtual memory that we can recollect. "This extension of virtual coexistence to an infinity of specific durations stands out clearly in *Creative Evolution*, where life itself is compared to a memory, the genera or species corresponding to coexisting degrees of this vital memory." (77) In fact, as Deleuze suggests, Bergson's notion of *simultaneity* exposes an ontology of time as singular and one (monism): "The Bergsonian theory of simultaneity thus tends to confirm the conception of duration as the virtual coexistence of all the degrees of a single and identical time." (85)

Deleuze will ask the question: What does Bergson mean when he talks about *elan vital*? "It is always a case of a virtuality in the process of being actualized, a simplicity in the process of differentiating, a totality in the process of dividing up: Proceeding "by dissociation and division," by "dichotomy," is the essence of life." (94) So, life is this process by which the virtual is actualized through absolute differentiation and division, or difference and repetition. We are immersed in the virtual even as we as creatures of the actual live out our lives in obliviousness to its hold on our minds and bodies. It is the virtual that sustains us and immerses us into the dark memories of Time which impinge on us through dreams, visions, and lucid light of hallucinogens. The horror of the world arises out of this virtual realm where the mythical structures that support us reside like so many demons or daemons awakening us to the dread and terror of the unknown.

It's as if there is something in this past, in the ontological spaces of Time's dark virtual chambers

that we have forgotten or repressed and need in our collective imaginings to remember and make 'real' or 'actual' again in our lives to become whole in our becoming. The late Mark Fisher in his small book *The Weird and the Eerie* asks: "Does not any real rejection of civilisation not entail a move into schizophrenia — a shift into an outside that cannot be commensurated with dominant forms of subjectivity, thinking, sensation?"⁹

Is this not the virtual continuum? As Fisher surmises: "The place beyond the mortifications of the Symbolic is not only the space of an obscene, non-linguistic "life", but also where everything deadened and dead goes, once it has been expelled from civilisation. "This is where I threw the dead things..." Beyond the living death of the Symbolic is the kingdom of the dead: "It was below me, drifting towards me from the furthest level where there was no life, a dark oval trailing limbs. It was blurred but it had eyes, they were open, it was something I knew about, a dead thing, it was dead." (102) We are caught in the dualistic trap of believing we are physical creatures born of matter (mother). We are bound to the organic treadmill of "birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death" as if this were all of it. Stuck in this soup of vital organicism we either seek a way out through some notion of Transcendence, or a more fantastic way in through Cyborgisation and merger with our machinic children or by way of enhancement dreams of genetic engineering. Whether of the older religious forms of immortality or the newer Transhuman forms offering a this-worldly immortality we seek to stay our existence against the notion of finitude.

For Fisher the weird and eerie were about the Outside, the great Unknown: "The allure that the weird and the eerie possess is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience." (8) We seem to intuitively grasp that there is something else, something more that we are missing or that surges within us reminding us of this greater reality we've been cut-off from. Much of the occulture surrounding the weird, eerie, and strange is just this sense of something we know but cannot grasp with our senses. A knowing that is a non-knowledge of things as they are rather than as they appear to us. Again, as Fisher tells it: "the weird is constituted by a presence — the presence of that which does not belong. In some cases of the weird is marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it. The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing or there is nothing present when there should be something." (61) In both instances there is this inability to represent this presence or absence in the weird and eerie.

Everything actual, everything that common sense and the sciences deal with is representable. We live in a natural world and our culture is based on the naturalist ideology and belief that we can through our minds and technologies access and describe this world in all its ramifications. We have this deep-seated need to control and master our world through scientific know-how and philosophical truth. Our fear is that this may not be all there is, that there may be something just outside the frame we cannot access or reference. This dread at the heart of the human that we are surrounded by forces we will never control or master. This is the Outside, the Noumenal, the Thing-in-itself, the Virtual... *The Abject World*.

1. Becker, Earnest. *Escape from Evil*. Free Press; Reissue edition (March 1, 1985)
2. Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy* vol. 1 (p. 8). John Hunt Publishing. Kindle Edition.
3. Fernando Pessoa. *The Book of Disquiet*. Penguin UK. 1998
4. Clasen, Mathias. *Why Horror Seduces* (p. 4). Oxford University Press. 2017.
5. Baumgartner, Brad. *Weird Mysticism (Critical Conversations in Horror Studies)* (p. 3). Lehigh University Press.
6. Newell, Jonathan. *A Century of Weird Fiction, 1832-1937: Disgust, Metaphysics and the Aesthetics of Cosmic Horror (Horror Studies)* (p. 9). University of Wales Press.
7. Byrne, Thomas. *Deleuze's Transcendental Empiricism, Part 2*. Dec 29, 2021 <<https://medium.com/life-as-art/deleuzes-transcendental-empiricism-part-2-f274e279c802>>
8. Deleuze, Gilles. *Bergsonism*.
9. Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie* (p. 100). Watkins Media. Kindle Edition.

taken from here

Foto: Sylvia John

← PREVIOUS NEXT →

META

CONTACT

FORCE-INC/MILLE PLATEAUX

IMPRESSUM

DATENSCHUTZERKLÄRUNG

TAXONOMY

CATEGORIES

TAGS

AUTHORS

ALL INPUT

SOCIAL

FACEBOOK

INSTAGRAM

TWITTER